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A question of ethics in reporting

What's a reporter's obligation to identify himself or herself as a reporter in pursuing a news story?

Put another way, when is the source of a news story entitled to know he is talking to a reporter and that what he says may wind up in print? Always? Sometimes? Or what?

The questions arose in connection with a challenge to *The Star*'s handling of a story the other day, and it occurred to me that a brief discussion as to how the press operates in this delicate area might be of interest, and possibly some benefit, to readers.

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The case in point was this:

On Jan. 3 *The Star* reported, on Page 1, a Federal Trade Commission proposal that all used-car dealers be required to post window stickers advising customers about such things as dealer warranties, repairs made and previous damages to the used cars on sale.

On Jan. 4, on its Metro Page, *The Star* printed a story on a reporter's visit to half a dozen area used-car dealerships to check reactions to the proposed FTC order. The reporter in this instance presented himself as a potential customer rather than a newsman.

A dealer quoted in the story protested that approach. His quarrel was not with the remarks attributed to him but with the reporter's failure to identify himself. "If I'm going to be quoted," he said, "no reporter has the right to come in here and interview me without my knowledge that he's a reporter. I've been treated unfairly."

Right or wrong?

Allow me to duck a direct answer for a moment, for purposes of background.

First, a question of ethics, of fairness, clearly is involved here, and the instances when reporters fail to identify themselves to news sources are exceedingly rare. Apart from ethics, in fact, such identifications nearly always help, not hinder, news gathering. In a vast majority of cases, no purpose whatever is served by failing to do so.

But there *are* exceptions which newspapers, *The Star* included, occasionally do make as a matter of deliberate editorial judgment. And usually this occurs when hiding the reporter's identity is the only *way* to obtain information the public is entitled to get. Consider some examples:

- A reporter (it happened at *The Star*) arranges to enter a penal institution as a "prisoner" in order to report first-hand on conditions there, his identity hidden from guards and other inmates.
- A *Star* reporter, posing as a traveler, makes a dozen cab trips from National Airport to the same destination downtown to check allegations of flagrant rip-offs in taxi fares. The allegations pan out.
- A reporter takes his car to several auto-inspection agents in order to compare the "defects" discovered.
- A reporter poses, clandestinely, as a social worker. The articles that resulted, in another city, won a Pulitzer Prize.

Deceit? Certainly an element of it in each instance. But ethically illegitimate? It is hard to imagine an editor, or, I suspect, a reader, who would dispute that the means were justified to secure legitimate news which hardly could have been obtained otherwise.

The subject also can become a good deal more complicated than these cases suggest.

Most papers, for example, approach public business, and public officials who hold themselves out for public approbation, quite differently than they approach private individuals and their purely personal lives. Thus newspapers had no qualms about publishing the accidental bugging of Henry Kissinger's dinner-table conversation in Canada a few months ago when a mike plugged into the press-room inadvertently was left open. But reporting the results of eavesdropping on a personal conversation between private individuals in a news story without the knowledge of the parties concerned is certainly another matter.

So it boils down, in most cases, to this: A reporter's failure to identify himself may be justified in exceptional circumstances when the practice is *essential* to obtain legitimate news. But such instances are rare. They should be approached warily; editors, especially, have a strong obligation to weigh the importance of the story and to think through carefully whether the need really exists. Too often, I think, the tendency of some reporters is simply to barge ahead.

What of the ethics of the used-car story?

It is a particularly good example not only of the difficulty of the editorial decision-making process but of the fact that no pat answer fits every situation.

There was a specific reason in this case for the assigning editor's instructions that the reporter hide his identity: The intent was to try to capture some of the flavor and the substance of the reactions which consumers — as opposed to reporters — might logically encounter in asking the same questions themselves.

In a number of interviews around *The Star* newsroom I found no editor who felt that the judgmental decision here clearly was wrong, although some called it a "borderline decision" or a "tough question."

My own view is that while the reporter's failure to identify himself was no grave offense (indeed, what he got from the dealers as a "customer" seems to me about what he would have got as a reporter), the public-interest stakes this time probably didn't justify the predictable reaction of betrayal from the news sources.

That's Monday morning quarterbacking, of course, and it's easy.

What do you think?